

Xander Bogaerts owns island paradise

Burgeoning Red Sox star welcomed home to Aruba as a conquering hero



PROUD MOMENTS: Xander Bogaerts presents an autographed jersey to a young fan.

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By:

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A red carpet covered the sidewalk, stretching from the airport terminal to the limo parked a few hundred feet away. On either side stood Little Leaguers in full uniform, women holding babies, and grown men aiming iPhones for posterity. There were red and blue balloons and confetti poised for shooting.

This is what Xander-monium looks like.

And when Xander Bogaerts finally appeared that November day, clad in a pink dress shirt, gray blazer and blue jeans with a backpack strapped over both shoulders like a college student, the crowd shrieked and live television crews converged. It was a homecoming fit more for a conquering soldier than a 21-year-old Red Sox rookie who was still bleary-eyed after hopping the 7:15 a.m. JetBlue flight from Logan.

But to the people of Aruba, there wasn't any distinction.

"When I saw all those people, that probably kept me awake a lot more," Bogaerts said by phone in a half-hour interview with the Herald. "That was definitely a nice feeling. Seeing a lot of the kids, a lot of people really just appreciating what you did for your country, it was really nice."

What Bogaerts did, of course, was become the first Aruban to win the World Series — and only 10 weeks after making his major league debut, no less. He walked and scored the Red Sox' tying run in clinching Game 4 of the Division Series, then took over for struggling third baseman Will Middlebrooks in Game 5 of the ALCS and went 7-for-25 with two doubles, four walks and five runs scored in eight games through the end of the World Series.

For the Sox, it was a snapshot of the talent that has made Bogaerts one of baseball's most prized prospects and left scouts gushing over him as a future All-Star. But for the Dutch island of Aruba — 19.6 miles long, six miles across at its widest point, and located 15 miles off the northern coast of Venezuela — it meant so much more.

Ever since he returned home on Nov. 3, Bogaerts has gotten rock star treatment. Prime Minister Mike Eman greeted him at the airport gate and proudly dubbed him "a hero and exemplary role model for island youth" before sending him out into the warm embrace of about 1,000 people. Five days later, Bogaerts became the inaugural inductee to Aruba's Walk of Fame.

And last month, the renovated field in the Centro di Baro Lago Heights neighborhood of San Nicolas, down the street from where Bogaerts grew up, was renamed "Xander Bogaerts Ballpark" and adorned with a billboard bearing his picture.

"I used to play there. It's about 30 seconds from my house," Bogaerts said. "When I pass it, I see the big, 10-foot wall saying my name. Man, that's really special. Just to see how thankful and how happy the people are for you, it's crazy, man. I can go to a restaurant, and if I sign two balls, I can get a whole meal. "

And to think, Bogaerts is just getting started.

'It's not a dream'

It would be an upset if Bogaerts isn't in the Red Sox' 2014 Opening Day lineup.

The Sox haven't made any promises, and Bogaerts plans to arrive in Fort Myers before the end of the month to begin preparing for what he expects to be a competition for a job. But based on his performance in the playoffs, he likely has already earned it.

Bogaerts was the youngest Red Sox player to start a postseason game since Babe Ruth in 1916. The batting gloves he wore in the World Series were donated to the Hall of Fame. And years from now, we will talk about the two walks he drew after getting into a two-strike count against Cy Young Award winner Max Scherzer of the Detroit Tigers in Game 6 of the ALCS — extraordinary at-bats considering he walked once in 97 plate appearances one year earlier in Double A.

But Bogaerts has a different favorite postseason memory.

"Remember the triple I hit against the Cardinals at their home?" he said, alluding to a hit in Game 3 of the World Series. "That for me was a big moment. I think it was my first hit in the World Series. It was like a confidence boost. I was actually thinking about that today, just reflecting on the season, like, 'Wow, this really happened. It's not a dream.' "

So, it's no longer a dream to think Bogaerts will be a mainstay in the Red Sox' lineup. The only question now, it seems, is what position he will play.

Bogaerts was a shortstop long before the day in 2009 when he famously worked out for the Sox while still recovering from chicken pox. At 6-foot-3 and 185 pounds (and likely still growing), he's bigger than the prototypical shortstop. But infield coach Brian Butterfield has recommended to the organization that Bogaerts is capable of staying at short, citing his athleticism and footwork.

"We certainly believe he's a shortstop," general manager Ben Cherington said. "He could play another position if he had to, but we absolutely see him as a shortstop, long term."

Bogaerts nevertheless impressed manager John Farrell with his defense at third base, even though he hadn't played the position until the World Baseball Classic last March and admitted he wasn't entirely comfortable until the World Series after long hours with Butterfield, former Triple-A manager Gary DiSarcina and veteran infielder John McDonald. And if the Sox re-sign shortstop Stephen Drew, they could ease Bogaerts into the majors by dividing his time between short and third.

"I haven't heard anything at all," Bogaerts said. "But I've got to prepare for both. You never know what's going to happen until it happens."

Mom is his No. 1 fan

One thing won't change as Bogaerts becomes a full-fledged major leaguer. Every day, he will call his mother.

"When he's in the U.S., every day we Skype, we talk, we go over the day, we interact," said Sandra Brown, a social worker who raised Xander and his two siblings as a single mother. "Every single day, sometimes more than once a day. It's just like he's home, but not sleeping at home."

Brown always has been Bogaerts' biggest fan, even if she doesn't see many games in person. No fan of flying, she waited until Game 6 of the World Series to travel to Boston. Until then, though, she watched every inning of the postseason, "running around the room, just going out of my mind."

Over the past few months, Brown also has become Bogaerts' manager, helping to handle requests for interviews and appearances, including an invitation to address Aruba's full Little League contingent. With her assistance, Bogaerts established the "Dare To Dream" foundation to help finance equipment and transportation for children to play baseball and provide financial assistance for school tutoring.

Now, though, Brown hopes her son can return to some semblance of normalcy.

"Everyone wants a part of him and everyone wants him to do something," Brown said. "The main word here is 'overwhelming.' In the first press conference we had, I told everyone, 'Remember, he's just 21.' Everyone wants him to be like a celebrity. The whole show around it, that's not so important for us. It's time again to settle down and get back into his training."

But Xander-monium isn't showing many signs of abating. Local sports bars hosted public viewing parties during the playoffs, and months later, the most popular T-shirt in Aruba is still Bogaerts' No. 72 Red Sox shirt, some of which are homemade, according to Ronella Tjin Asjoe-Croes, the CEO of the Aruba Tourism Authority.

And what once was a 15-minute trip to the grocery store has become a more time-consuming endeavor for Bogaerts, who is mobbed by fans seeking his autograph or simply a handshake.

"Xander is a great ambassador for the island," Asjoe-Croes said. "His natural charisma reflects so well what we as Arubans are known for. The pride that we felt each time Aruba was mentioned during the World Series was just awesome."

Indeed, when it comes to Aruba's national treasures, Bogaerts ranks with white sand beaches and Divi Divi trees.

"I remember the day I signed (with the Red Sox), the shirt I wore was No. 15 for (Dustin) Pedroia and my brother had 34 for (David) Ortiz. Now, I see so many kids and older folks with 72," Bogaerts said. "There's not a better feeling than that. I always dreamed somebody would wear my jersey.

"It's weird. You're not just a normal person anymore, you know? You're someone a lot of people look up to, so you have to try to do things the right way. For me, I'm still the same. I know what kind of person I am, and I'm not going to change at all. For me, this is just the beginning."

Source :

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